

January 2013

Turkey and the Western Balkans: Between Soft Security and the Ottoman Legacy¹

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The European Union (EU) perceives the Western Balkans as its own internal affair. Indeed, the EU is the main centre of gravity for the region, without a serious long term alternative such as Turkey, Russia or China. On the other hand, the region is—excluding post-Soviet space—the most multipolar part of Europe. Moreover, the influence of above mentioned states in the region has risen substantially in the recent years. Last but not least, the EU leverage in the region is pluralistic, namely without one key stakeholder such as Germany in case of the previous enlargement (Central Europe). In consequence, the EU's magnetism in the short and medium term perspective can be contested by above mentioned players, particularly in case of permanent stalemate or substantial slowdown of the accession process. From the perspective of the EU interests in the region the most challenging is Russia's way of doing business. On the other hand, the largest overlapping occurs between the EU's agenda and the priorities of Turkey and the United States.

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The ideas in this paper were presented at the Atlantic Council's workshop, "Moving the Balkans and Bosnia Forward: A Post-Dayton Roadmap" on November 13-14, 2012. Done in conjunction with the US Army War College, the workshop brought together forty top US and European experts and policymakers to identify regional and national initiatives that could encourage the Balkans region to continue on the path toward euro-Atlantic integration.

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Turkey constitutes a unique case among the third players because as a partly Balkan state and former regional power it is to a large degree the "native" stakeholder. In difference to Russia and China, Turkey is a very important contributor to the security of the region and plays an important role in soft power dimension (education, development aid, etc.). Within the framework of the Turkish foreign policy, the Western Balkans occupies one of the most important places, though the region does not possess such a crucial significance for Turkey as the Middle East. Despite insufficient coordination and an increasingly independent course

¹ Parts of this article are going to be published within the report Putting European House in order: The EU and the Western Balkans.

of the Turkish foreign policy, Turkey generally acts in the region in cooperation with the EU (particularly the United Kingdom) and the United States. This stance derives from the Turkish support for the Euro-Atlantic aspirations of the region. However, possible permanent crisis in Turkey's accession to the EU would definitely have a serious negative effect on cooperation between Brussels and Ankara in the Western Balkans. On the other hand, strong bonds and common interests between the West and Turkey should prevent a long term "cold war" scenario between Ankara and Brussels in the region. The Western Balkans would be also the most likely place where after the possible crisis a reconciliation process between Turkey and the EU could be launched. Turkey does not have sufficient potential to torpedo the EU's agenda in the Western Balkan region. Its leverage in the region is decisively smaller than the EU's. However, Turkey may significantly hamper the EU interests in the region, particularly in case of substantial slowdown of the enlargement process in certain Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia) resulting in an increase of euroscepticism among the Balkan Muslims and ethnic Macedonians. Therefore, the prospect of EU membership is a vital issue, which links Turkey and the Western Balkan countries. Although Turkey's influence in the region has increased substantially in the last decade, there is still huge room for improvement, especially economically. Certainly, an establishment of proper relations with all the actors in the region would also serve Turkey's position.

Turkey's leverage in the Western Balkans derives mostly from the legacy of the Ottoman Empire, namely a heritage of around 450 years of the Turkish Ottoman rule over almost the entire Western Balkans and its geopolitical proximity. The most striking consequence of this legacy is the strong links between Western Balkan Muslims and Turkey. Reciprocally, Turkey hosts around ten million people who, at least partly, have roots in the Western Balkans. It is worth reminding that due to demographic trends (higher natural growth than Christians), the share of Muslims in the religious structure of the Western Balkans will substantially increase in the coming decades. Inevitably, close historic links between Muslim communities from the Western Balkans and Turkey contribute to a very strong identification of Albanians and Bosniaks with Turkey.² However, an image of Turkey as a protector of Balkan Muslims sometimes is its liability in the region because Ankara is perceived as too biased. Moreover, Turkey's allies in the region are not interested in completely aligning their foreign policy with the Turkish one because their relationship with the United States is more important for them (i.e., they abstained during the voting on Palestine's status in the United Nations (UN) in November 2012).

Turkey is one of the important stakeholders in the economic sphere of the region, but its economic ties with the region are certainly below its potential. Turkey is an important trading partner for Kosovo and Albania.³ Turkey has held an important share in foreign direct

² According to the Gallup Balkan Poll, around 75 percent of them have declared that they feel similar to Turks in terms of mentality and culture. Gallup Balkan Monitor, *Insights and Perceptions: Voices of the Balkans, 2010*. <http://www.balkan-monitor.eu/index.php/dashboard>

³ Its share in Kosovo's trade turnover is around 8 percent, of that of Albania around 6 percent. The world economic crisis caused a significant drop of Turkey's share in Bosnia's trade volume from 4% to more than 2,5%. In Bosnia, Turkey has a larger share in Bosniak cantons' trade volume. In case of Macedonia Turkey's share in its trade turnover is around 3,5%. On the other hand, Turkey still has a strong position in terms of its export capacity to the region. A remarkable example of this is that Turkey's export to Bosnia increased by 250 percent in 2007.

investment (FDI) inflows into several Western Balkan states in recent years (Albania, the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Macedonia, and Montenegro) and especially in the construction sectors of Albania, The Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Macedonia, and Kosovo.⁴ Turkish investments and construction projects are often located in key areas, such as the construction of airports and strategic highways. Turkey is also an important donor of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the region, especially in above mentioned states. The largest recipient of the Turkish ODA is Kosovo. But its share is the largest in case of the entire aid received by Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia.⁵ The special bond between Turkey and the Muslims of the Western Balkans is reinforced by a relatively large body of Muslim students from the Western Balkans who study in Turkey (more than 2000) and, in return, Turkish universities and secondary schools for non-Turkish students, in the great majority Muslims, operate in the Western Balkans, especially in Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia. Turkey is also a popular touristic destination for Western Balkan people. According to the estimates, in 2012 more than half million visits from the region to Turkey were undertaken. In difference to Russia and China, Turkey as a member of the Southeast European Cooperative Initiative (SECI) and the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) can be called a local stakeholder. In the case of Bosnia (Federation), Kosovo, and Macedonia, Turkey plays the role of their main protector in the international arena (e.g., lobbying for their international recognition or accession to the international organizations). For instance, in 2009, on the initiative of Turkey, the Friends of Bosnia Group was established within the framework of NATO. In 2010, Turkish lobbying helped Bosnia in its being awarded the status of a NATO candidate country. Turkey is also the main advocate of Macedonia's bid to the NATO. On a number of occasions, Turkey has acted as a supporter of Western Balkan countries in their relations with the EU. For instance, Turkey took a very critical approach to the EU over the EU tolerance of Greece's blocking of Macedonia's accession process, for not liberalizing the visa regime for Albania and Bosnia together with Macedonia, Montenegro, and Serbia in 2009, and for not launching a dialogue on this issue with Kosovo until 2012.

Despite the evident special relationship with Balkan Muslims, Turkey is definitely more successful in reaching out to non-Muslim actors than Russia is in the case of non-Orthodox stakeholders. Turkey's ability to build good relations with almost all the political actors in the region earned it favorable opinions, and an image of at least neutral country among most Christian nations of the Western Balkans.⁶ The remarkable improvement in Turkish-Serbian relations took place in 2009, which also paved the way for Turkey's contribution to a rapprochement between Bosnia and Serbia. However, the recent change of the government and the president in Serbia could lead to a decrease of cooperation between Ankara and

⁴ For instance, its investments in Albania make up around 15 percent of the country's foreign direct investment stocks and in the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina almost 5 percent (particularly in the Bosniak cantons) Until 2011, the value of contracts undertaken by Turkish firms in Macedonia's building sector exceeded 630 million USD, in Albania reached 580 million USD and in Kosovo exceeded 500 million USD. In the first half of 2012 Turkish companies finalized construction projects worth of 230 million USD.

⁵ In 2009-2010 Turkey's development aid formed of the entire aid received by Macedonia, Montenegro and Bosnia respectively 9 percent, 8 percent and 6,5 percent

OECD Development Co-operation Directorate (DCD-DAC), *Aid Statistics, Recipient Aid Charts*, http://www.oecd.org/countrylist/0,3349,en_2649_34447_25602317_1_1_1_1,00.html (accessed January 17, 2012)

⁶ According to the Gallup poll, Macedonians, among non-Muslim inhabitants of Western Balkans, have a particularly positive attitude towards Turkey. Around 80 percent of them perceive Turkey as a friendly country. Gallup Balkan Monitor, *Insights and Perceptions*.

Belgrade. *Republika Srpska* in Bosnia is the only regional actor which has bad relations with Turkey. Its negative approach to Turkey results from Ankara's assertive support for the Bosniak national interests.

Turkey is also an important contributor to the region's security and stabilization. Since the early 1990s, Turkish armed forces and police have been present in almost all the EU, NATO and UN military and civilian missions in the Balkans. And this continues today, through such military and rule of law missions as the European Union Force ALTHEA (EUFOR/ALTHEA), as well as the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo (EULEX), and the Kosovo Force (KFOR) mission.⁷ Another aspect of Turkey's contribution to the stability of the region has been its efforts in training and equipping the armed and police forces of the countries of the Western Balkans. After the war in Bosnia, all the Croatian and Bosniak soldiers of the Army of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, and a huge part of the officers of the Albanian and Macedonian forces, were trained in Turkey. In this respect, Turkish armed forces have become one of the most significant "caretakers" of Kosovo's security forces.

Turkey's interest in regional stability also involves a fight against organized crime and religious extremism. Turkey plays a very effective role in the fight against heroin smuggling (so called the Balkan route going from Afghanistan through Iran, Turkey, and the Balkans to the EU), constituting 16 percent of global heroin interceptions.⁸ Turkey's dual combat, in the first place with the mafia at home, and then in the region, strikes a blow against organized crime in the Western Balkans. According to the World Drug Report 2010, "Once heroin leaves Turkish territory, interception efficiency drops significantly. In the Balkans, relatively little heroin is seized, suggesting that the route is exceedingly well organized and lubricated with corruption. In 2008, the countries and territories that comprised South East Europe (a total of eleven countries, including Greece and Cyprus) seized 2.8 metric tons (mt) of heroin. This is in sharp contrast to what is seized upstream in Turkey (15.5 mt in 2008). . . . In other words, for every kilogram seized in the South East Europe, nearly 6 are seized in Turkey."⁹ Turkey provides training to police forces of some Western Balkan countries (Albania, Bosnia, Kosovo, and Macedonia) and supports an increase of the regional cooperation in combat against the organized crime.¹⁰ Turkey restrains an extremist Islamist influence of the Middle East on Balkan Muslims.¹¹ The Presidency of Religious Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (*Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı*) acts as a key patron for mainstream Muslim religious structures in the Balkans through financial aid and training. In 1995, the *Diyanet* established the Eurasian Islamic Council, which gathered Muslim communities from the Western Balkans, other parts of Europe, and the former Soviet Union.

⁷ The Turkish police and officials in EULEX in Kosovo form around 4% of the international contingent. In the EUFOR/ALTHEA military mission, the Turks formed around 30% of the contingent. In KFOR, Turkish contingent constitutes 7,5 % of the force.

⁸ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010* (New York: United Nations Publication, Sales No. E.10.XI.13, 2010), p. 46.http://www.unodc.org/documents/wdr/WDR_2010/World_Drug_Report_2010_lo-res.pdf

⁹ UNODC, *World Drug Report 2010*, p. 57

¹⁰ In November 2009, the SECI and the RCC signed a "memorandum of understanding" to develop cooperation in preventing and combating cross border organized crime and promoting the principles of the rule of law and strengthening regional cooperation.

¹¹ Turkey, as the leader of the Organization of the Islamic Conference, is a member of the Steering Board of the Peace Implementation Council, an organization responsible for the implementation of Dayton Peace Accords in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Despite certain problems and tensions between Brussels and Ankara, the Western Balkans represents a unique case of a regular and large Turkish engagement in the EU missions. Close cooperation in the Western Balkans could become the paradigm for the cooperation between Turkey and the EU, within the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP) especially with respect to the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). However, the future of the cooperation between Turkey and the EU, both in general and in the Western Balkan region, seems to depend, to a large extent, on Turkey's EU accession process and the unresolved Cyprus problem. The EU should link the Turkish accession process and those of the countries of the Western Balkans to the issue of the region's stabilization. A part of this scenario could be an establishment of a special mechanism, such as trilateral summits between the EU, the Western Balkan countries, and Turkey. The main topics of this summit should be cooperation between all the actors in coping with the security challenges of the Western Balkans, common implementation of *acquis communautaire*, and economic cooperation.